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Mao's Spell and the Need to Break It

by DIDI KIRSTEN TATLOW • DEC. 28, 2011

XIAN, CHINA — For Sun Shengan, the hundreds of life-size terra-cotta warriors guarding the tomb of Qin Shihuangdi, the emperor who unified China in 221 B.C., are impressive, but sad.

“Look carefully at their faces, and you will see each is different,” Mr. Sun, a former government employee now working as a private guide, said while showing visitors around recently. Yet, “not a single one looks happy. Perhaps because they were too oppressed,” he said, nodding meaningfully.

For more than 2,200 years, the terra-cotta army in the central Chinese city of Xian has stood as a ghostly, underground guard for its tyrannical emperor, a chilling illustration of how “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,” as Stephen Dedalus says in the James Joyce novel “Ulysses.”

China, too, is trying to awake from its history, as evidenced by a growing push-and-pull over political rights and the spoils of economic reform.

As people search for happiness and freedom, spiritual traditions are flourishing, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and folk religions, as well as Christianity and even Bahai.

But according to Robert N. Bellah, one of the world’s foremost sociologists of religion, to establish true freedom through a societywide, ethical framework that is connected to Chinese traditions, the country first must break the tyrannical spell cast by Mao Zedong, who led the Communists to victory in the civil war in 1949 and ruled with an iron fist until his death in 1976.

Mr. Bellah, 84, spoke by telephone from California shortly after a trip to China, where he discussed his new book, “Religion in Human Evolution.” The book traces the roots of belief and ethics in human society and examines four cultures — Israel, Greece, China and India — from 800 B.C. to 200 B.C., when major world philosophies were formed.

In the book, Mr. Bellah notes the parallels between Mao and Qin Shihuangdi, a follower of the Legalist philosophy, which taught that only harsh punishments could keep people in line and provide effective government. The Qin emperor silenced criticism, burned books and buried scholars alive, while Mao, who admired the emperor, once boasted that he had caused the death of

more scholars than Qin Shihuangdi.

“Turning away from Legalism and Mao is going to be a challenge, because they haven’t worked their way through the Mao period,” said Mr. Bellah, a sociology professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley.

“His picture is still there, and they want to separate the good from the bad part of Mao Thought. Well, sorry, you can’t. You’ve got to break the spell,” said Mr. Bellah.

Mr. Bellah said he was deeply impressed by the forward-looking optimism and — relatively — free debate he saw in China among intellectuals and students.

Yet people also seem to be morally adrift, with the “eviscerated” Marxism of the Communist Party failing to provide the framework for a functioning set of beliefs, Mr. Bellah said.

Chinese leaders, who are officially atheist, assume that they have a moral system in place already, he said.

“The fact that Marx is taught at every level, from kindergarten to university, shows that they think they have a civil religion. The fact that to many Chinese it’s a joke and they don’t take it seriously shows they have a problem on their hands.”

“I think China has to face the fact that Mao was a monster, one of the worst people in human history,” said Mr. Bellah.

He compared China’s situation today to that of Germany and Japan after World War II.

“In a curious way, it’s like the war guilt of Germany or Japan. I think in Germany they’ve come to terms with it, whereas in Japan there’s almost a dramatic lack of any sense of responsibility,” said Mr. Bellah, who is also a Japan scholar.

“There is so much self-pity in China about the Western powers and the 150 years of imperialism, and about the Japanese aggression” of World War II, said Mr. Bellah. “And it’s justified in a way.”

“But God knows what Mao did can’t be blamed on the Westerners or the Japanese,” he said. “The Chinese have their own guilt, and it requires a complex symbolic, ideological and psychological change, and that’s hard.”

Why do morals matter? Because tyranny does not work. Qin Shihuangdi’s short-lived reign proved

that, Mr. Bellah writes in “Religion in Human Evolution.”

“Somehow a moral basis of rule was necessary after all,” he wrote.

What, then, might China’s “moral basis” look like, as the country looks to the future as an increasingly important member of the world community?

Mr. Bellah offered the traditional Chinese concepts of tian, or heaven; li, manners or rituals; and yi, justice, as some building blocks of morality.

The emphasis in his book on Chinese tradition as a contemporary guide was warmly welcomed in a recent essay in the state-run newspaper China Daily, in which the writer, Zhang Zhouxiang, argued, perhaps pointedly, that li justifies the ruler’s right to rule but that the ruler also has an obligation to treat his subjects well.

“The ruled are asked to maintain order, but they also have the right to choose another ruler if the covenant is broken,” Mr. Zhang wrote.

Importantly, the Confucian tradition of individual self-improvement also provides “a moral resource, no question,” said Mr. Bellah.

“In this way, China is deeply egalitarian. I think there are great moral resources in China for moving ahead in good directions, but you can’t predict these things,” he said, noting that the Communist Party relies on people’s fear of social chaos to justify its controls.

“But there’s a certain point at which that argument isn’t enough,” he said. “You need something more substantial than that.”

True ethical standards — in fact, a new civil religion — must develop “if China is to fulfill its ability to be one of the great powers of the 21st century,” Mr. Bellah said.

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